"Cunt": On the perception and handling of verbal dynamite by L1 and LX users of English[1]

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1. Introduction

When British defence minister Anna Soubry shouted "sanctimonious cunt" amid heckling and shouting at Ed Miliband (the then leader of the Labour opposition) during a rowdy debate in the House of Commons on the 25th of February 2015, she caused a media storm. The incident was captured on camera by a BBC crew and it was too juicy to ignore. However, it was difficult to report since the word is banned in newspapers, who refer to the "c-word", and it is beeped out in radio and television reports. The BBC "sanitized" the recording from the House of Commons and removed the excerpt from the documentary on the House. Apparently, under BBC editorial guidelines the word "cunt" can only be broadcast in the most extreme circumstances. The uncensored version appeared on Buzzfeed (https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/most-unparliamentary-language).
Tom Harris, MP for Glasgow South, wrote in the *Telegraph* about Anna Soubry's "unparliamentary language" referring to her use of "a vulgar four-letter word in the House" (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/conservative/11435222/Anna-Soubry-would-know-better-than-to-call-Ed-Miliband-a-sanctimonious-c--in-the-House-of-Commons.html). He added that the "c-word isn't even "officially" one of the expressions to have been banned from use in the chamber. Guttersnipe is. And so is sleazebag. And sod. And git" (id.). The *Guardian* newspaper reported that when Soubry was contacted "shortly before the documentary was broadcast to ask whether she had called Miliband a "sanctimonious cunt", the senior Conservative strongly denied ever having used the term and threatened to sue the paper. She added: "I would never use that word and I would never use it in the House of Commons (…) I'm not having that (…) I can absolutely assure you I have never used language like that and I can equally assure you on the back row … we wouldn't think of shouting a word like that, the foulest word." http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/25/labour-tory-minister-accused-swearing-ed-miliband-apologise
Anna Soubry claimed to have said "sanctimonious rubbish" instead. Whether she actually used "cunt" or not is irrelevant for the purpose of the present study, it does illustrate the violent public reactions, including accusations and denials, that the use of "cunt" generates.

Muscio (2009) described the word as "the most powerful negative word in the American English language", adding that it is "the ultimate one-syllable covert verbal weapon any streetwise six-year-old or passing motorist can use against a woman" (p. xxiii). Jane (2014) reported that the word is frequently used in gendered vitriol on the Internet. The metaphor of "cunt" being the

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equivalent of verbal dynamite was further strengthened in a study (DEWAELE 2015) that focused on the perceptions of native speakers of British and American English of the word "cunt" among a list of negative emotion-laden words. "Cunt" was judged to be the most offensive word by both groups, with an identical mean score of 4.6 on a 5-point scale.

Knowledge about the offensiveness and the effects of a word like "cunt" reflects an individual's pragmatic competence, defined by Fraser (2010: 15) as "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended." The social dimension is highlighted in Kasper and Rose's (2001: 2) definition of sociopragmatic competence: "the social perceptions underlying participants' interpretation and performance of communicative action". Both definitions underline that pragmatic competence involves production as well as reception and that there always is a danger of miscommunication or misinterpretation. Indeed, it can be hard to catch elusive nuances and anticipate how interlocutors will react to particular words, how they will react to a violation of socially accepted behaviour, and what the social consequences are of doing this. A lot depends on the specific word or expression. As Terkourafi (2008) pointed out, some swearwords can semantically encode face-threat but other constructions may simply pragmatically implicate face-threat in a generalised manner on a par with generalised conversational implicatures of politeness. There seems to be agreement among pragmaticists that "sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence is gained through observation of interactions – and direct interactions with – members of the speech community in a wide variety of situations" (Culpeper 2010: 16).

LX learners who become LX users quickly learn that grammatical competence in the LX is no guarantee for pragmatic success; they "may produce grammatically flawless speech that nonetheless fails to achieve its communicative aims" (Fraser 2010: 15). They may also struggle to use offensive words appropriately. As Beers Fägersten (2012) argued, the use these words are part of "a complex social practice fulfilling intricate pragmatic functions" (20) and getting it wrong can cause serious embarrassment to the LX users and their interlocutor(s) (Dewaele 2012; Terkourafi 2008).

Despite journalists' and academics' clear interest in the word "cunt", very few have considered how it is perceived and used by LX speakers of English. The present study aims to partly fill this gap by focusing on individual differences in understanding, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of the word "cunt" by various groups of English users. The first step will be a comparison of data on the word provided by English first language (L1) users (defined as people who have acquired English before the age of 3 but who may have acquired other languages too) and English foreign language (LX) users (defined as people who have acquired English after the age of 3 and have acquired other languages, including one or multiple L1s and other LXs) (cf. Dewaele 2017a). The second step will be a comparison of the strength of the effects of a range of independent variables among L1 and LX users including: 1) personality traits (Extraversion, Neuroticism and Psychoticism); 2) sociobiographical variables (education level, age, gender, swearing in the workplace); and 3) linguistic profiles (self-reported oral

proficiency and frequency of use of English for all participants, age of onset, context of acquisition, stay in an English-speaking environment for the LX user of English).

We will start with a short overview of research on swearwords, and more specifically those who included the word “cunt”, in psychological, sociolinguistic, pragmatic and multilingualism research. After that, five research questions will be presented, followed by the methodology section. The answer to the first research question is provided by a statistical analysis of the full database (*N* = 2347), while the answers to the following research questions are based on parallel analyses of the databases of the English L1 and LX users. The results will then be discussed and some tentative conclusions will be presented.

2. Literature review

One popular and flawed assumption is that people who use swearwords lack control, moral fibre, education, and resort to swearwords because they are inarticulate. Jay and Jay (2015) proved that this assumption is totally baseless by showing a strong positive correlation between taboo fluency (i.e. the ability to recite or write down as many taboo words as possible over a short time span) and other measures of verbal fluency. The authors conclude that: “a voluminous taboo lexicon may better be considered an indicator of healthy verbal abilities rather than a cover for their deficiencies” (p. 7). The researchers used the Controlled Oral Word Association Test and calculated taboo word fluency and animal word fluency in spoken and written formats. Participants were American university students (*N* = 43 in study 1, *N* = 49 in study 2 and *N* = 126 in study 3) who were asked to generate as many words as possible starting with a particular letter or belonging to certain category within a set time. Participants generated 533 taboo words, representing 95 different taboo word types. The top ten taboo words accounted for more than half of the data: “fuck (48), shit (46), cunt (42), bitch (41), asshole (33), whore (21), slut (19), motherfucker (15), bastard (15), and damn (14)” (p. 5). The authors found that taboo fluency was negatively correlated with the personality traits Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, and positively correlated with Neuroticism. They emphasized that: “As we think about taboo words, we must keep in mind a variety of psychological, social, and biological variables (…) - these may apply differently depending on what aspect of taboo language is under consideration” (p. 8).

The study by Jay and Janschewitz (2008) straddles psychology and second language pragmatics. The authors used a well-known instrument in pragmatics research, namely a Discourse Completion Test to gather data on offensiveness and likelihood of hypothetical scenarios involving taboo words among American and foreign university students, including 68 L1 users of American English and 53 English LX speakers. They found that judgments of appropriateness of the use of three high taboo words (“cocksucker”, “cunt” and “fuck”), three medium taboo words (“bastard”, “goddamn”, and “piss”) and three low taboo words (“crap, “hell” and “idiot”) depended on three main types of independent variables: 1) speaker-listener relationship in terms of status (dean, janitor and student); 2) social-physical context (Dean’s office, Dorm

room and Parking garage); and 3) particular taboo word used. A gender difference emerged among the L1 users, with females providing higher offensiveness ratings than their male peers, but no such difference existed among the LX users. The level of English experience had no effect on offensiveness or likelihood ratings, which could be attributed to the fact that the LX speakers had been in the US for an average of 11 years, which meant that they were highly proficient and socialised in English.

Christie (2013) took a discursive pragmatic perspective on the indexical values of swearwords, including Gwyneth Paltrow's use of the word "cunt" on an American television chat show. She argues that there is a metadiscourse of swearing that "legitimises one social group's use of swearwords when that swearing takes place within certain parameters of use" (p. 163). Her analysis of reactions in the press that Paltrow's use of the word was **inauthentic** leads her to conclude that "swearword use that is not justified within the terms of this metadiscourse is to some extent delegitimised (p. 167).

Psychologists have used a very wide variety of approaches to investigate individual differences in the use of swearwords, including continuous recordings of participants over a certain period of time. Mehl, Goslin and Pennebaker (2006) recorded 2 continuous days of conversations of 96 Texan university students through an electronically activated recorder. A significant positive relationship emerged between students' frequency of swearing and Extraversion as rated by others (p. 867). Those swearing more scored significantly lower on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness and male participants who scored low on Openness to Experience also swore more (p. 871). Emotional Stability was unrelated to frequency of swearing.

The growth of internet allows unparalleled access to verbal material. Schwartz et al. (2013) used an open-vocabulary technique, collecting 700 million words and phrases from 19 million Facebook status updates written by 136,000 people. About half of the participants filled out the International Personality Item Pool. The results showed strong gender differences with male participants swearing significantly more, and younger people swearing more than older people. Similarly to the study by Mehl et al. (2006) swearing was linked to low scores on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness, and, diverging from Mehl et al. (2006), swearing frequency was positively correlated with Neuroticism. No link was found between swearing frequency and Extraversion and Openness. Despite some variation in findings, there seems to be broad agreement that "people with an antisocial personality swear more often than others, whereas people who would have high scores on religiosity, sexual anxiety, or repression seem to swear less frequently (Vingerhoets et al. 2013: 301).

Sociolinguists have investigated variation in the use of stigmatised language and have focused on the effects of situation combined with age, gender, ethnicity, social class and ethnicity of speakers and interlocutors. In a pioneering study Bailey and Timm (1976) presented 14 women and 15 men (aged 19 to 61) with hypothetical situations and asked them when they would swear and what they would say. The social identity of the interlocutor, their age, sex and the presence of children and parents determined the choice of swearwords (p. 444). Women preferred weak expletives such as "darn" (25 tokens compared to 3 tokens for men). Men reported a preference for stronger expletives such as "fuck" (10 tokens, compared to 4 tokens for the

women). "Shit" was used in similar numbers by men (29 tokens) and women (32 tokens) (p. 441).

Beers Fägersten (2007) collected data from 60 American undergraduate students through three different tasks: offensiveness ratings for 12 isolated swearwords, perceptions of swearword use in short utterances, and post-questionnaire interviews. The word list included 12 swearwords which are presented in the order of their mean offensiveness rating (on a 10-point scale) for the whole group: "Nigger": 8.5, "Cunt": 6.6; "Motherfucker": 5.9; "Bitch": 5; "Fuck": 5; "Asshole": 4.4; "Bastard": 4.3; "Dick": 4.1; "Ass": 3.2; "Shit": 3.1; "Damn": 2.3; "Hell": 2.3 (p. 19). Beers Fägersten found in subsequent interviews that offensiveness depended on the participant's experiences with the words: "African-American female: Like somebody might call someone a "cunt" and that's not a really nice thing to say, like, "You're a cunt." That's not real nice. That's the way I looked at it" (p. 20). Another participant observed that how the words were used could increase or limit their offensiveness: "White female: These ("bitch", "cunt", "dick" and "nigger") are higher because I think they're used in a more derogatory way usually, so that's why. […] These ("ass", "asshole", "bastard", "damn", "fuck", "hell", "motherfucker" and "shit") are more common. I hear them in everyday speech, but the others, probably not" (p. 20). Interestingly, when asked what words on the list they would definitely avoid, "Forty-six percent of the participants said that they would not use the word cunt, an even larger percentage than those unwilling to use the word nigger" (p. 22). It thus seems that these two words remained taboo among these young Americans. Over three quarters of participants declared that the offensiveness of the listed words was fixed and unchanging, declaring, for example, that "I think I'll always be offended by these words", while a fifth declared that the offensiveness depended on the context: "A lot of words would be offensive to other people, and I think their offensiveness always depends on the context in which they are said, why they are said, who said them and to whom" (p. 22).

The second part of Beers Fägersten's questionnaire contained utterances that had been recorded during the observation phase of the study and did not include "cunt". Some words like "fuck", "shit", "fucking" appeared more than once and obtained different ratings, highlighting the importance of context. In decreasing order of offensiveness the words were: "Fucking(3)": 5, "Motherfucking": 3.7, "Fuck": 3.4, Shit(1): 3.1, "Fucking(2)": 2.8, "Shit(2)": 2.7, "Fucking(1)": 2.5, "Ass": 2.4, "Shitty": 2.2 (p. 29).

Johnson and Lewis (2010) provided further evidence on the importance of context in judging swearing. One hundred and three American university students responded to 12 imaginary situations in the workplace where a co-worker/supervisor uses the phrase ''oh, shit'' (Terry's an ass, fuck off, that sucks, damn clients, screw you) during a formal meeting (social gathering)" (p. 111). They showed that people have certain expectancies about swearing based on social norms. Swearing messages used in the informal situation were less likely to violate of hearer's expectancies. When they were violated in the formal situation, they created surprise and a perception that the speaker was incompetent. Gender and social status were unconnected to perception of swearing (p. 115).

Sociolinguists have also used huge corpora, such as the British National Corpus (BNC), to look at frequencies of use of swearwords across

gender, social class, age and education level. Rayson, Leech and Hodge (1997) found that “fucking” and “fuck” are particularly frequent in male speech. Younger people (i.e. aged under 35) also used these words more frequently, in addition to “shit”. A similar pattern emerged for skilled working class and working class speakers who also used the word “bloody” more frequently (p. 10). McEnery and Xiao (2004) confirmed that the word “fuck” in the BNC is more frequent in the speech of men (p. 240), teenagers and young adults (p. 241), speakers from lower social classes and people who left school at age 15-16 (p. 246).

One important point about swearing was made by Norrick (2009) and Stephens (2015) who pointed out that it is not a purely “negative” activity. Swearwords can be powerful positive pragmatic markers. Norrick (2009) counted secondary interjections (i.e. words who belong to other word classes) in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English Corpus and found 171 instances of “shit”, 160 “damn” and 116 “fuck” used as interjections (p. 871).

Swearwords can contribute to rapport-building in the work environment (Baruch and Jenkins 2006; MacLeod 2011). MacLeod (2011) recorded ten lunch break conversations between five male Australian tradespeople in their workplace. Her participants produced a total of 1188 tokens of “fuck” and 195 tokens of “cunt” (p. 5). These words were not used in a derogatory manner but in a “kind of jocular mockery” (p. 5) with the aim of building solidarity within the group and exclude non-group members.

The final part of this literature review focuses on multilingualism research into emotion and emotion-laden words (Dewaele 2013; Pavlenko 2005) which has extended into the emotional resonance, the offensiveness and the use of swearwords in participants’ multiple languages. The sub-category of swearwords and insults fits in the larger category of emotion-laden words (Pavlenko 2008: 148). Pavlenko pointed out that some words can fit in various (sub)categories: “For instance, taboo and swearwords that commonly function as insults may in some contexts appear as friendly terms of affection. On the other hand, words that are not commonly viewed as emotion-laden may acquire emotional connotations in discourse” (p. 148).

Various publications have been based on data collected through the Bilingualism and Emotion Questionnaire (BEQ) (Dewaele & Pavlenko 2001-2003) to which 1564 adult multilinguals contributed. Analyses of self-reported language choices for swearing revealed that the L1 is typically preferred though Asian and Arabic participants often reported a preference for swearing in the LX because it allowed them to avoid social and cultural constraints (DEWAELE 2004, 2013).

A number of successive studies based on the BEQ database showed how the LX had been learnt was linked to later use of that language for swearing: those who had learnt the LX exclusively through classroom instruction were less likely to use it for swearing. Early starters reported higher frequency of swearing in the LX. Also, a high general frequency of use of a LX, a high level of proficiency, strong socialisation in the LX and a wide network of LX interlocutors were linked to more frequent swearing in the LX (DEWAELE 2004b, 2011a, 2013). Preference for swearing in the L1 also exists among adult multilinguals who used the L1 and an LX constantly and reported maximal proficiency in both languages (DEWAELE 2010, 2011b). L1

swearwords were also perceived as having significantly more emotional resonance than LX swearwords.

DEWAELE (2016a) is one of the largest studies on swearing in English L1 and LX. It was based on data reflecting the understanding, perception and self-reported use of 30 negative emotion-laden English words, including swearwords among 1159 L1 and 1165 LX English users. LX users were found to be less sure about the meaning of the words and reported using the more offensive words less frequently compared to L1 users. Surprisingly, the LX users overestimated the offensiveness of most words. It suggests that blanket statements about swearwords in one language compared to another do not necessarily match specific words. The LX users overestimation of offensiveness could be linked to a metaphorical red flag attached to swearwords and an avoidance of use. Long-term socialisation in English-speaking environments, naturalistic acquisition of English and higher levels of proficiency in English LX were linked to closer approximation of L1 users' values.

Using the same database, DEWAELE (2016b) looked at individual differences in the self-reported frequency of swearing among the English L1 and LX users. Participants reported most frequent swearing in interactions with friends, when alone, and gradually less swearing with family members, colleagues and strangers. Those with high scores on Psychoticism, Extraversion and Neuroticism reported significantly more swearing in English. Education level, age group and gender were also linked to self-reported frequency of swearing. Comparing the strength of situational, psychological and sociobiographical variables between the L1 and the LX users, it turned out to be weaker overall among the LX users of English, possibly because of increased heterogeneity in their history of learning English, their LX socialisation, their proficiency levels and their frequency of use of English.

DEWAELE (2015), in a follow-up study, focused on differences in the understanding of the meaning, the offensiveness and the frequency of use of the negative emotion-laden words, as well as in self-reported frequency of swearing, between speakers of two varieties of English. The comparison of 414 L1 speakers of British and 556 L1 speakers of American English showed no significant differences in self-reported frequency of swearing. The British English L1 participants did report a significantly better understanding of about half the words and rated words like "bugger", "thick", "bollocks" and "wanker" to be significantly more offensive than the American English participants. The latter rated "fool", "shit", "stupid", "daft", "slut", "lunatic", "idiot", "bitch", "damn" and "fruitcake" as significantly more offensive. The British participants reported a higher frequency of use of a third of words (with the words "bollocks", "bugger", and "wanker" standing out) while the American participants reported more frequent use of half of the words (with the words "jerk", "moron" and "weird" standing out). The British participants scored significantly higher on the understanding of "cunt" and on its self-reported use but no difference existed for the offensiveness of the word (p. 333).

A final study using the same database (DEWAELE 2017b) focused on bi-varietal speakers of American and British English who had been living outside the US. A comparison of the understanding of the meaning, the offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use of four English emotion-laden words of British origin and four English emotion-laden words of

American origin (not including “cunt”) between 477 L1 users of American English living in the US and 79 Americans living outside the US showed significant differences between both groups for the words of British origin but not for the words of American origin. The degree of multilingualism across the sample was also linked to variation in the dependent variables linked to the four British words, but not the American words. It was argued that semantic representations of emotion-laden words originating from another L1 variety are relatively weaker and can shift as a result of intense and prolonged exposure to their use in other varieties, as well as the presence of other languages in the mind of the L1 user.

This short overview of research on swearwords and swearing in applied linguistics and neighbouring disciplines shows to what extent the perception and usage of swearwords is variable and fluid. Situational variables such as the type of interlocutor speakers face, combine with certain personality traits, with social background variables and with participants’ unique linguistic profiles. It also shows that swearing appropriately requires advanced cultural and sociopragmatic knowledge. It takes time for LX users to calibrate the offensiveness of certain words in a variety of situations. The present study will narrow the research down to a single, highly offensive word, “cunt”, and investigate variation in its perception and self-reported use among L1 and LX users of English.

3. Research questions

1. What differences exist in L1 and LX users’ understanding of the meaning of “cunt”, its offensiveness and its self-reported frequency of use?
2. To what extent are the meaning, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of the word linked in L1 and LX users?
3. To what extent are Extraversion, Neuroticism and Psychoticism linked to the understanding of the meaning of “cunt”, its offensiveness and its self-reported frequency of use in L1 and LX users?
4. Do sociobiographical variables (education level, age, gender, swearing in the workplace) have a similar effect on the understanding of the meaning of “cunt”, its offensiveness and its self-reported frequency of use in in L1 and LX users?
5. What is the effect of English language learning history (self-reported oral proficiency, frequency of use of English, age of onset, context of acquisition, stay in an English-speaking environment) on the understanding of the meaning of “cunt”, its offensiveness and its self-reported frequency of use among English LX users?

4. Methodology

4.1. Instruments

Snowball sampling was used to collect data (Ness Evans and Rooney 2013). Targeted emails were sent to teachers and students, and informal contacts asking them to forward the link to an anonymous online questionnaire in English. It remained online for five months in 2011-2012. It attracted

responses from about 2500 participants who filled out the questionnaire, 2324 did so completely.

On-line questionnaires allow the collection of large amounts of data from diverse samples in terms of sex, age, race, socio-economic status and geographical location (Wilson & Dewaele 2010). Participants in this type of research do not represent the general population as this would require random sampling which is extremely expensive and therefore rarely happens in social sciences. Ness Evans and Rooney (2013) argue that it is not really a problem because social scientists "are typically testing theories, not generalizing to entire populations" (p. 127). The main requirement for participation in the case of the present study was sufficient metalinguistic awareness, sufficient ability and willingness to engage with the questions on language preferences and use of taboo language. This inevitably appeals more to highly educated people (Dewaele 2013). This is not a problem but it means the findings have to be interpreted with this limitation in mind and it limits their generalisability. Another issue is the truthfulness of self-report. Although there is no iron-cast guarantee that participants report the exact "truth", social scientists and linguists assume that individuals who volunteer to participate in a study report to the best of their ability. They had nothing to gain in falsifying their responses in the current study. Moreover, the social desirability bias (i.e. the tendency of participants to answer questions in a manner that they imagine will be viewed favourably by the researcher) was limited because of the anonymity. Also, the large sample size means that the effect of outliers is limited and that the findings have sufficient ecological validity.

4.2. Independent variables

Participants started by ticking the consent box before filling out a short sociobiographical questionnaire with questions about their age, gender, education level, language profile (number of languages known, self-perceived oral proficiency in English, age of onset of acquisition of English, context of acquisition of English, stay –and length of stay- in English-speaking environment) and present use of English (frequency of English use and frequency of swearing of people in the current school, university or workplace).

Participants also filled out the short version (12 items) of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQr) (Eysenck, Eysenck and Barrett 1985), based on self-reported typical behaviour. One item for Extraversion is for example: 'Are you a talkative person?'. One item for Neuroticism is for example: 'Do you often feel lonely?'. Finally, one item for Psychoticism is: 'Would you like other people to be afraid of you?' Once the negatively phrased items are reversed, the sum of items is calculated for the three dimensions. A majority of people score in the middle of the dimension. The Eysenck factors, also called "the Giant Three" are strongly replicable across the world (Barrett, Petrides, Eysenck and Eysenck 1998). The EPQr is considered robust. The values for the Cronbach alpha are high enough (all < .85) to suggest good internal consistency. Three groups were created for each personality dimension: participants within 1 standard deviation (SD) around the mean (the middle group), those with scores more than 1 SD above

the mean (the high group) and those with scores with more than 1 SD below the mean (the low group).

The research design and questionnaires received ethical clearance from the research institution.

4.3. Dependent variables

While previous studies (DEWAELE 2015, 2016a) focused on differences between 30 English emotion-laden words and expressions, and in differences in understanding, perception and self-reported use of these words between L1 and LX English users, and between British and American L1 users, the present study focuses on one single word from that list namely "cunt". The reason for singling out "cunt" in the present study is that it was the only word on the list for which LX English users significantly **underestimated** its offensiveness. They **overestimated** the offensiveness of the 29 other words (see figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1

The 30 words were embedded in short sentences which were extracted from the British National Corpus (BNC), "a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources, designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the later part of the 20th century, both spoken and written" (http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/). The transcriptions of oral speech include unscripted conversations between British English participants from different age groups, regions and social classes in different contexts, ranging from formal meetings to radio shows and phone-ins. "Cunt" occurs 213 times in the BNC in 67 different texts, which means it has a frequency of 2.17 instances per million words. It is used infrequently in its anatomical sense and more frequently as an insult, typically preceded by adjectives like "fucking", "dirty", "stupid", "miserable", "fat", "little", "ugly", "silly".

"Cunt" is described as belonging to vulgar slang (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cunt). The primary meaning in British English is: "woman's genitals", its secondary meaning is "an unpleasant or stupid person". The noun originates in Middle English and is related to the Norwegian and Swedish dialect words "kunta", and Middle Low German, Middle Dutch, and Danish dialect "kunte". Its primary meaning is similar in American English where it is also described as vulgar slang (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/cunt).

Mohr (2015: 8) pointed out in her historical analysis of Latin and English swearwords that in the Middle Ages "by God's bones" would have been much more shocking than "cunt". Today "cunt" belongs to the Big Six worst words in English ("*cunt*, *fuck*, *cock* (or *dick*), *ass*, *shit* and *piss*)" (17). Wachel (2002) reported that the word "cunt" was accompanied by the following labels in 20 American and British dictionaries: "vulgar," "obscene," "coarse slang," "taboo," "very rude and offensive" (p. 197). He himself describes the word as the most taboo word, together with "fuck" (p. 198).

Muscio (2009) argued that "cunt" was an ancient title of respect for women, which was publically acceptable until the 15th century before mysteriously crossing over from acceptable to taboo (Stephens 2015). Feminists reclaimed the term in the 1970s, but it's still used as a vitriolic term

of abuse (Jane 2014) and continues to have a strong misogynistic overtone (Stephens 2015).

The word “cunt” figures in the affective norm list of 13,915 English words produced by 1,827 native speakers of American English residing in the USA (Warriner, Kuperman and Brysbaert 2013). The authors calculated the valence (the pleasantness of the stimulus), arousal (the intensity of emotion provoked by the stimulus), and dominance (the degree of control exerted by the stimulus) of the words, which had been rated on a 9-point scale. The word “cunt” scored low on valence (*Mean* = 3.7, *SD* = 2.9) compared to mean score for valence (*Mean* = 5.1, *SD* = 1.7) for the whole corpus. “Cunt” scored above the scale average for arousal (*Mean* “cunt” = 6.1, *SD* = 2.5; *Mean* scale = 4.21, *SD* = 2.3), and below the scale average for dominance (*Mean* “cunt” = 3.2, *SD* = 2.5; *Mean* scale = 5.2, *SD* = 2.2). According to these norms “cunt” can be described as a word that evokes negative feelings, elicits strong emotion and evokes feelings of being controlled (Warriner et al. 2013).

In the present study, the word “cunt” was embedded in a short utterance (“what a cunt!”) created by the researcher, based on the original occurrence in the BNC: “he’s a bit of a cunt”. The word was embedded in an expression in order to include minimal script as it affects the evaluative meaning of unambiguous emotion words (Greasley, Sherrard and Waterman 2000).

Participants answered the following question for 30 words, including “cunt”: “For each word/expression, provide a score on a scale (0 = very low, 5 = very high) for the following: 1) How well you understand the meaning? 2) How offensive it is? 3) How frequently do you use it?”. We have argued that the feedback on the three questions offers a glimpse of semantic and – possibly- also of conceptual representations (DEWAELE 2017). Participants reporting how sure they are about the meaning of a word might give a subjective general indication, but it is impossible to conclude that those who reported complete understanding of the word actually had an accurate representation. The judgement about offensiveness reveals how accurate that aspect of the semantic concept is by comparing it to the group mean, and the self-reported frequency of use gives a fair but subjective indication about occurrence – in other words, its presence in scripts, which are part of the conceptual representation. The distinction between the semantic and conceptual component is fuzzy in itself as it could be argued that knowledge of offensiveness is situated both at the semantic and the conceptual level.

One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov tests showed that the values for understanding, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of the word “cunt” were not normally distributed: Understanding: $N = 2323$, *Mean* = 4.51, *SD* = 1.18, *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* = .48, $p < .0001$; Offensiveness: $N = 2323$, *Mean* = 4.47, *SD* = 1.19, *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* = .44, $p < .0001$; Self-reported frequency: $N = 2323$, *Mean* = 1.44, *SD* = 1.04, *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* = .43, $p < .0001$. As a consequence, non-parametric statistical techniques were used: Mann-Whitney tests instead of t-tests, Kruskal Wallis one-way analyses of variance by ranks instead of ANOVAs and Spearman Rank correlation analyses instead of Pearson product-moment correlation analyses.

4.4. Participants

A total of 2347 people (1636 females, 664 males) participated in the study[1]. The mean age was 32 years (*SD* = 12), ranging from 16 to 76. They were generally highly educated with 219 having a high school diploma, 772 a Bachelor's degree, 758 a Master's degree and 570 a PhD. This profile is typical in web-based language questionnaires (Wilson & Dewaele 2010).

In terms of nationality, the largest group were Americans (*n* = 555), followed by British (*n* = 426), Poles (*n* = 125), Germans (*n* = 107), French (*n* = 105) with smaller number of Italians, Israelis, Swiss, Dutch, Canadians, Belgians, Spaniards, Austrians, Swedes, Australians and smaller groups representing another 75 nationalities, including many with double nationalities.

The sample of participants consisted of 190 monolinguals, 503 bilinguals, 645 trilinguals, 517 quadrilinguals, 279 pentalinguals, 125 sextalinguals, 37 septalinguals, 16 octalinguals, 9 nonalinguals, one participant reported 10 and another 12 languages.

English was the most frequent L1 (*n* = 1159). Slightly over half of the participants had English as a foreign language (*n* = 1165). Their L1s were German (*n* = 171), French (n= 135), Polish (*n* = 124), Spanish (*n* = 104), Dutch (*n* = 90), Italian (*n* = 87), Swiss German (*n* = 43), Swedish (*n* = 39), in decreasing order there were smaller groups of native speakers of Portuguese, Hebrew, Russian, Chinese, Finnish, Greek, Croatian, Serbian, Turkish, Hungarian, Japanese, Catalan, Danish, Norwegian and another 48 languages with fewer than 10 participants. Many participants also listed two L1s.

The English L1 users rated their oral proficiency in English very high: *Mean* = 4.9 (*SD* = .70) on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "minimal" to maximal". They also reported extremely frequent use of English (*Mean* = 4.8, *SD* = .74) on a 5-point Likert scale. The English LX users rated their oral proficiency in English significantly lower but still high: *Mean* = 4.4 (*SD* = .73) on a 5-point Likert scale (Mann-Whitney $Z = -23.6$, $p < .0001$). They also reported significantly lower – but still frequent - use of English (*Mean* = 4.2, *SD* = 1.0) on a 5-point Likert scale (Mann-Whitney $Z = -22.6$, $p < .0001$).

Mean age of acquisition of English for the LX users was 9.7 years (*SD* = 3.8). Most participants had learned English in mixed contexts, namely a combination of classroom instruction and authentic use outside (*n* = 552), others had learned it through classroom instruction only (*n* = 503), while the remaining 102 participants had learned English naturalistically, i.e. without any formal instruction. A majority of LX users had lived – or was currently living – in an English-speaking country for more than 3 months (*n* = 673), with the remaining 489 not having left their home country. A majority of the LX who had lived in an English-speaking environment had done so for more than 6 years (*n* = 266). The others had been abroad between 3 months and 1 year (*n* = 69), between 1 and 2 years (*n* = 40), between 2 and 3 years (*n* = 38), between 3 and 4 years (*n* = 37) and between 4 and 5 years (*n* = 37). Participants were also asked about the frequency of swearing of people in their current school, university or workplace swear on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "very frequently" (*Mean* = 3.1, *SD* = 0.9).

5. Results

A series of Mann-Whitney U tests for independent samples showed that the 1165 English LX users reported a significantly lower level of understanding of the meaning of “cunt”, of its offensiveness and of its self-reported frequency of use than the 1159 English L1 users. Both groups reported using the word very infrequently.

INSERT TABLE 1

The mean values are visualised in figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2

A first series of Spearman rank correlation analyses on the data of the 1158 L1 users’ data showed that understanding was positively linked to offensiveness (*Rho* = .05, $p < .021$) and to self-reported frequency of use of the word (*Rho* = .18, $p < .0001$). Offensiveness was positively linked to self-reported frequency of use of the word (*Rho* = .13, $p < .0001$). A Spearman rank correlation analysis of the 1165 LX users’ data showed that understanding was highly -and positively- linked to offensiveness (*Rho* = .52, $p < .0001$) and to self-reported frequency of use of the word (*Rho* = .22, $p < .0001$). Moreover, offensiveness was negatively linked to self-reported frequency of use of the word (*Rho* = -.11, $p < .0001$). In other words, in both L1 and LX groups, understanding was positively linked to offensiveness. A higher level of understanding was also linked to a more frequent self-reported use. However, whereas L1 users who rated the offensiveness high were less likely to use the word, the opposite pattern emerged for LX users with those reporting higher levels of offensiveness also reporting more frequent use.

The personality traits Extraversion and Neuroticism had no effect on understanding and offensiveness among L1 and LX user populations (see table 2). They did have an effect on self-reported frequency of use, with those scoring higher on these dimensions reporting more frequent use of the word. Psychoticism had a significant effect on the three dependent variables among L1 users, those scoring higher on this dimensions reported a better understanding, lower offensiveness and more frequent use. Psychoticism was not linked to understanding and offensiveness among LX users but those scoring higher on this trait reported more frequent use of the word (see figure 3).

INSERT TABLE 2

A Kruskal Wallis test revealed that education level had no effect on understanding among L1 and LX users. It did have an effect on offensiveness among L1 users but not among LX users, with more highly educated L1 users rating the word as more offensive (see table 2). Education had a similar significant effect on self-reported frequency of use of the word among both L1 and LX users, with more highly educated users reporting less frequent use of the word (see figure 4).

INSERT FIGURE 4

A Kruskal Wallis test revealed that age had no effect on understanding of both L1 and LX users. It did have an effect on offensiveness among LX users but not among L1 users, with older LX users rating the word as more offensive (see table 2). Age had a significant effect on self-reported frequency of use of the word among both L1 and LX users, with younger users reporting more frequent use of the word (see figure 5). The difference between L1 and LX users is biggest among the teens, with the L1 teens reporting more use of the word than their LX peers.

INSERT FIGURE 5

A Mann Whitney test showed no significant gender difference among L1 users for the understanding of the word (see table 2). However, male L1 users perceived the word to be significantly less offensive than female L1 users and reported more frequent use than female L1 users. Male LX users reported a better understanding of the word and more frequent use than female LX users (see figure 6). No gender difference emerged for offensiveness among LX users.

INSERT FIGURE 6

A Kruskal Wallis test revealed that frequency of swearing in the workplace had no effect on understanding among L1 users but did so among LX users, with those reporting frequent swearing also feeling a significantly better understanding of the word. It did have a significant effect on offensiveness among both L1 and LX users, with more frequent workplace swearing linked to higher offensiveness. Interestingly, LX users who reported very infrequent swearing in the workplace rated the offensiveness of the word much lower than those in workplaces where more swearing occurred. Swearing in the workplace had a similar effect on self-reported frequency of use of the word among all participants, with more frequent workplace swearing linked to more frequent use of the word (see figure 7).

INSERT FIGURE 7

The next analyses focus exclusively on the LX users. A Kruskal Wallis test revealed that self-reported oral proficiency in English had a significant effect on the understanding and offensiveness of the word, with more proficient LX users reporting higher levels of understanding and offensiveness. However, self-reported oral proficiency was independent of frequency of use of the word (see figure 8).

INSERT FIGURE 8

A Kruskal Wallis test showed that frequency of use of English was linked to the LX users' values. More frequent users of LX English reported a better understanding, higher levels of offensiveness and more frequent use of the word (see figure 9).

INSERT FIGURE 9

Kruskal Wallis tests revealed that Age of onset of learning English had a significant effect on understanding (with early starters reporting a better understanding than later acquirers) but it had no effect on offensiveness nor on self-reported frequency of use of the word. Also, Context of acquisition was found to have a significant effect on understanding and on self-reported frequency of use of the word (with instructed learners reporting a more limited understanding than mixed and naturalistic learners and reporting less frequent use of the word) but it had no significant effect on offensiveness (see figure 10).

INSERT FIGURE 10

Unsurprisingly, a Mann Whitney test showed that those who had lived for more than 3 months in an English-speaking environment had a significantly better understanding of the word and rated its offensiveness higher than those who had stayed in their home country. However, the latter reported a significantly higher frequency of use of the word (see figure 11). Focusing on the 487 participants who had lived (or were currently living) in an English-speaking environment, it turned out that length of stay had a significant positive effect on understanding of the word (df = 5, Chi^2 = 15.0, p < .01) but had no effect on offensiveness (df = 5, Chi^2 = 7.4, p = ns) nor on frequency of use of the word (df = 5, Chi^2 = 9.1, p = ns).

INSERT FIGURE 11

6. Discussion

Jay and Jay (2015) pointed out that a variety of psychological, social, and biological variables are linked to taboo words and their effects may vary according to the "aspect of taboo language is under consideration". The present study incorporated another dimension, that of L1 versus LX users of English, before investigating the effects of these independent variables in the two groups of users of English.

The answer to the first research question is positive, as significant differences were found between the values of L1 and LX users' for the understanding, the offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use of the word "cunt". The L1 users rated the word as very offensive, confirming previous findings (Beers Fägersten 2007; Jay and Janschewitz 2008; Jay and Jay 2015; Muscio 2009). Unsurprisingly, LX users were less sure about the exact meaning of the word, underestimated its offensiveness and reported using it less frequently than L1 users. This confirms earlier research that showed that taboo words in particular do not get the same degree attention in foreign language classes, which leaves LX learners/users unsure about the exact meaning, and the degree of offensiveness of the word (DEWAELE 2016a). If these words are encountered, LX users are often warned about them and discouraged to use them. This warning makes sense because LX users typically do not enjoy the same linguistic privileges that L1 users have because their foreign accent marks them as out-group members, while

swearing is a typical “in-group” activity that marks identity and belonging (DEWAELE 2008). Swearwords encountered during the learning of the LX thus become “red flag” words in the LX users’ mental lexicon (DEWAELE 2016a). The most surprising finding in DEWAELE (2016a) was that “cunt” turned out to be the only word for which LX users significantly **underestimated** the offensiveness while they overestimated the offensiveness of the other 29 words on the list. DEWAELE (2016a) speculated that LX users were unaware that “cunt” was in a league of its own as far as offensiveness is concerned. In other words, it is not just any red flag word but a “double-red” one.

The second research question allowed us to shed new light on the unique status of “cunt” in the arsenal of English users. The analysis of the relationship between understanding, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of the word among the L1 and LX users revealed that a better understanding was positively linked to offensiveness among L1 and LX groups. This makes sense, as understanding and offensiveness are two crucial aspects of the semantic representation of the word: knowing one aspect implies knowing the other one. English users who felt they grasped the meaning of the word reported being more likely to use it. A significant difference emerged between L1 users and LX users in the link between offensiveness and self-reported use. L1 users who rated the word as being very offensive reported infrequent use the word. However, LX users who reported higher levels of offensiveness for the word also claimed to use it more frequently (with the exception of LX users who had lived in an English-speaking environment). The obvious explanation is that outside English-speaking environments, LX users can use the word “cunt” with a certain degree of impunity, as its illocutionary force will be much weaker and LX listeners are less likely to be offended. This was precisely the explanation that Asian and Arabic speakers gave for their preference for English swearwords in their home-environment: it allowed them to escape the local social constraints, and the English swearwords were not as stigmatised as the equivalent local ones (DEWAELE 2013). As a consequence, English LX users may end up underestimating the explosive power of the word. Metaphorically, one could say that they fail to see the second red flag.

The third research question considered the effect of personality on understanding, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of the word in the L1 and LX user populations. It turned out that Extraversion and Neuroticism were unrelated with understanding and offensiveness among L1 and LX users but participants scoring higher on Extraversion and Neuroticism reported **using** the word more frequently. It other words, they were perfectly aware of meaning and offensiveness but still chose to deploy it in interactions. This pattern confirms the findings by Jay and Jay (2015) and Schwartz et al. (2013) about taboo fluency and swearing being positively correlated with Neuroticism. It also mirrors the finding by Mehl et al. (2006) about Extraversion as perceived by others being positively linked to swearing (a relationship Schwartz et al. (2013) failed to establish). However, Mehl et al. (2006) failed to find a link between swearing and Emotional Stability. Our L1 users with high scores on Psychoticism reported a better understanding of the word, rated its offensiveness lower and claimed a more frequent use. The only difference between L1 and LX users for Psychoticism was that a higher

score on this dimension was unrelated to a higher understanding and offensiveness for the LX users. However, LX users who scored high on Psychoticism also reported more frequent use of the word. These findings are very similar to the ones for self-reported frequency of swearing by the same participants (DEWAELE 2016b). Participants scoring high on Extraversion, Neuroticism and Psychoticism reported more swearing in English with different interlocutors. It thus seems that people scoring high on Psychoticism hone and sharpen their linguistic arsenal, which may take a little extra time in an LX, and practice the taboo words regularly. This does not imply that these words are always used aggressively: DEWAELE (2016b) found that most swearing was reported in the presence of friends, where the taboo words were used as form of friendly banter. It does confirm the general finding in the literature that people with an antisocial personality swear more frequently (Vingerhoets et al. 2013).

The fourth research question looked at the differential effects of sociobiographical variables on understanding, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of "cunt" in the L1 and LX user populations.

Education level was unrelated to understanding among L1 and LX users but it was linked to frequency, with less educated participants reporting higher use of the word. A difference emerged between L1 and LX users for offensiveness, with more highly educated L1 users rating the word as more offensive than less educated L1 users. These patterns reflect findings in sociolinguistic research (cf. McEnery and Xiao 2004; Rayson, Leech and Hodge 1997). The higher offensiveness ratings of "cunt" by more highly educated participants do not seem to be linked to a better understanding of the word (indeed, it is a common word after all) but rather how the word is perceived in their specific speech community. LX users typically need more time to distinguish subtle social and gender differences in the LX (Mougeon, Nadasdi and Rehner 2010).

The lack of an age effect on understanding of both L1 and LX users suggests that the youngest of our participants already had a clear idea about the meaning of the word and its offensiveness for L1 users. Older LX users rated the word as more offensive than younger ones, possibly because they had gone through a longer LX socialisation process. The finding that younger L1 and LX users reported more frequent use of the word is again in line with sociolinguistic research (cf. McEnery and Xiao 2004) and with the earlier finding that teens swear more frequently than older age groups (DEWAELE 2016b). The fact that the difference between L1 and LX users is biggest among the teens, with the former reporting more use of the word than the latter confirms the advantage of L1 users being fully socialised in their L1.

Male and female L1 users reported a similar level of understanding of the word, but differences appeared in offensiveness, with female L1 users judging the word to be significantly more offensive than male L1 users and reporting less frequent use. A slightly different pattern emerged for LX users, with male LX users reporting a better understanding of the word and claiming more frequent use than female LX users. Perceived offensiveness was similar between men and women among LX users, possibly because they had not yet been able to pick up the gender differences in interactions, a phenomenon also observed among male and female LX users in an immersion context (Mougeon et al. 2010). LX users seem to have

accommodated toward the L1 users' gender patterns in frequency of use of the word. Jay and Janschewitz (2008) reported the same pattern for offensiveness, with female L1 users providing higher offensiveness ratings on the taboo words than the male L1 users while no gender difference for offensiveness existed among the LX users. Male users' high self-reported frequency of use of "cunt" matches earlier sociolinguistic research on the use of various taboo words (cf. Bailey and Timm 1976; McEnery and Xiao 2004; Rayson, Leech and Hodge 1997; Schwartz et al. 2013).

We have argued before that sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence is gained through observation of interactions -and direct interactions with- members of the speech community in a wide variety of situations. It is therefore not surprising that frequent swearing in the workplace had helped LX users gain a better understanding of the word. Frequent swearing in the workplace had an equally significant effect on gauging the offensiveness of the word among both L1 and LX users, with more frequent workplace swearing linked to higher offensiveness of the word. In other words, the workplace allowed these users to calibrate the exact degree of offensiveness of "cunt" in that environment. A lack of swearing in the workplace robbed LX users of the opportunity to develop their semantic representation of the word leading them to underestimate its offensiveness. The phenomenon that people tend to reproduce speech practices of their environment in other contexts was confirmed with the finding that the frequency of swearing in the workplace was linked to more frequent general use of the word by both L1 and LX users.

Diverging from linguistic practices in the workplace, even if that implies swearing, could harm one's career argued Leach (2014), a British journalist for the respectable British broadsheet *The Guardian*. She presented anecdotal evidence that swearing is frequent and accepted in the worlds of advertising, catering, probation and journalism (http://www.theguardian.com/careers/careers-blog/swearing-at-work-good-career-acceptable-job). Indeed, swearing (appropriately) can enhance the social status of the speaker: "it influences the perceived credibility, intensity, and persuasiveness of the swearer" (Vingerhoets et al. 2013: 287). While being on the receiving end of a taboo word in the workplace can hurt, swearing with colleagues as part of friendly banter can be interpreted as funny, promote group solidarity and inhibit aggression (p. 287). As Johnson and Lewis (2010) pointed out, being able to produce context-appropriate swearing does not violate expectancies of participants. MacLeod (2011) and Baruch and Jenkins (2006) argued that swearing in the workplace can be appropriate in some situations: "such as operational meetings or informal workplace discourse" (2006: 494). In other words, even highly taboo words can occasionally be used in positive ways (cf. Norrick 2009; Pavlenko 2008; Stephens 2015).

Referring back to the introduction, it seems that Anna Soubry was probably right in judging that her fellow Members of Parliament would not bat an eyelid when she called the leader of the opposition a "sanctimonious cunt" during the raucous debate in the House. She had witnessed sufficient interactions in that context to develop a keen sense of the unwritten pragmatic rules in the house (Culpeper 2011). However, the presence of a camera meant that her audience suddenly expanded beyond that particular speech community to include the general public, which had a different opinion and

which forced her to deny later that she had ever used the toxic word. Anyone using swearwords risks misreading the situation, and an L1 user uttering words that are considered inappropriate may create a perception of rudeness, vulgarity or incompetence (Terkourafi 2008). This is also the danger that LX users face, though their violation of pragmatic norms could be attributed to ignorance and therefore judged to be of an accidentally nature and therefore merely labelled as unintentionally impolite (Terkourafi 2008).

The fifth research question dealt specifically with the English LX users and the effect of their English language learning history and current use of English on understanding, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of the word "cunt".

Self-reported oral proficiency had a strong positive link with understanding and offensiveness of the word among LX users, with more proficient users reporting higher levels of offensiveness. However, highly proficient LX users did use the word more frequently.

A partially similar pattern emerged for frequency of use of English with more frequent users reporting a better understanding, higher levels of offensiveness and also more frequent use of the word. This is not surprising, considering that frequency of use is correlated with proficiency (DEWAELE 2013).

LX users who had started learning English early in life reported a better understanding than later starters) but it was unrelated to offensiveness nor self-reported frequency of use of the word.

The context of acquisition of English was unrelated to offensiveness but was linked to understanding and self-reported frequency of use of the word. LX users who had learnt English only through classroom instruction reported a more limited understanding than mixed and naturalistic learners and reported less frequent use of the word.

The final independent variable in the cluster of language learning history and use of the LX that turned out to have a significant effect on understanding of meaning, offensiveness and self-reported use of "cunt" was the fact of having lived in an English-speaking environment. Being fully immersed in the LX environment increases the chances of observing or participating in events where the word is uttered (cf. Culpeper 2010). Better understanding of the exact meaning and offensiveness led to a lower frequency of use compared to those who had not lived in an English-speaking environment. The length of time abroad was only linked to a better understanding of the word, but not to a higher perceived offensiveness nor to more frequent use. One possible explanation is that LX users' avoidance of the word could be both a cause and a consequence of perceived offensiveness. Being unsure about the exact offensiveness might dissuade LX users from trying out the word. They may also have been discouraged to use the word because of a lack of L1 group membership. This confluence of factors is unlikely to change over time for LX users.

The patterns that emerged for these independent variables linked to English language learning and use correspond broadly with those for frequency of LX use to express emotions, emotional resonance of the LX and foreign language anxiety (DEWAELE 2004a, b, 2011, 2013). The patterns also corresponded more specifically with those uncovered for the full set of 30 negative emotion-laden words in DEWAELE (2016a) that included the word

"cunt". More contact and exposure to English, from a younger age and outside the classroom, were linked to a better understanding of the meaning of the words, a better calibration of offensiveness and often a higher frequency of use.

A limitation of the present quantitative research design is that the voices of the participants are absent and their unique perceptions and experiences with the word "cunt". Future qualitative research could collect both quantitative and qualitative data (cf. Beers Fägersten 2007) from L1 and LX users on their perception of the word in a range of contexts and situations, including the gender of the interlocutor, and on their pragmatic calculations underlying their decisions to use or avoid the word with specific interlocutors.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to investigate individual differences in the perception and use of "cunt", one of the most offensive words in the English language, using data collected from a large sample of L1 and LX users of English. Being so offensive, the word is not used frequently, and it when it is uttered in the proximity of a recording device, it is usually beeped out in broadcasts. Its public use creates a media storm if the speaker is a public figure such as British defence minister Anna Soubry.

Words are not intrinsically offensive and there was nothing to predict centuries ago that "cunt" would become an unprintable word in the English language (Mohr 2015). The offensiveness of a word is determined by the view that the speech community has of it. The sexist connotations of the word probably contribute to its taboo status (Jane 2014; Muscio 2009, Stephens 2015). Taboo does not mean totally forbidden. In a recent incident, a racist thug who was being sentenced for breaching an antisocial behaviour order, yelled at the judge, Patricia Lynch QC, that she was "a bit of a cunt". And Judge Lynch replied: "You are a bit of a cunt yourself." https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/aug/10/judge-defendant-john-hennigan-exchange-insults-chelmsford-court). The judge was applauded in the press for having used the word "cunt" herself in legitimate linguistic self-defence. It thus seems that she had judged the situation well and used the word appropriately in the court of public opinion. It seems that the word "cunt" uttered by a woman (cf. Anna Soubry in the House of Commons) to a man removes the misogynistic connotation of the word, making it slightly less offensive.

The analysis of the data of English L1 and LX users revealed that the ability to know when and where a taboo word like "cunt" can be used requires considerable sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills, typically honed through years of socialisation in the speech community (cf. Baruch and Jenkins 2006; Culpeper 2010; MacLeod 2011; Terkourafi 2008). It is therefore not surprising that LX users are typically at a disadvantage: their semantic representation of highly taboo words is often incomplete (being less sure about the meaning of the word, its offensiveness and hence the consequences it could have being used inappropriately), which leads to avoidance of the word compared to L1 users (who do not use it much either). It is not clear either whether LX users who use "cunt" in order to be consciously rude will merely be judged by L1 users to be impolite because of their status as LX users and the assumption of gaps in their pragmatic competence (Terkourafi 2008)

Early and longer or more intense LX socialisation, high proficiency and frequent use of LX English, frequent swearing in the workplace were linked to closer approximation of L1 norms. A longer stay in an English-speaking environment in itself was insufficient to boost perceived offensiveness and frequency of use of the word. Personality, age and education level appear to be linked to frequency of use rather than to the semantic representation of the word, both for L1 and LX users. Only gender was also linked to the semantic representation with female participants reporting a better understanding, a higher degree of offensiveness and a lower frequency of use of the word.

To conclude, "cunt" really is the verbal equivalent of dynamite outside specific close-knit social groups, which explains why it has to be handled with extreme caution.

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Table 1: Comparison of the values of L1 and LX users for the understanding of the meaning of "cunt", its offensiveness and its self-reported frequency of use (Mann-Whitney test)

	Mean ranks		Mann-Whitney U	Z	p
	L1	LX			
Meaning	1281	1044	537028.5	-12.6	.0001
Offensiveness	1213	1111	615142.5	-4.9	.0001
Frequency	1226	1098	600361.5	-5.9	.0001

Table 2: Overview of the effects of independent variables on the understanding, the offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use of "cunt" (Kruskal Wallis Chi^2 and Mann Whitney Z)

Independent variable	**Meaning**		**Offensiveness**		**Frequency**	
	L1	LX	L1	LX	L1	LX
Extraversion	5.2	5.9	0.5	4.4	11.0*	13.3**
Neurotism	1.7	3.2	1.4	5.2	18.4***	5.0
Psychoticism	13*	3.1	24.5***	.5	63.9***	26.4***
Education	.3	5.3	9.4*	6.4	25.8***	23.4***
Age	8.6	6.9	3.7	13.7*	38.8***	34.4***
Age of Onset	N/A	8.6*	N/A	2.3	N/A	7.1
Context of learning	N/A	15.9***	N/A	4.5	N/A	22.4***
Oral Proficiency	N/A	150***	N/A	67***	N/A	1.3
Frequence of Use	N/A	68**	N/A	36***	N/A	14.0*
Swearing Workplace	2.0	19**	11.8*	10.5*	83.5***	52.9***
Gender	2.0	.4***	3.2*	1.0	7.8***	98***
Lived in English	N/A	.4***	N/A	5.3***	N/A	2.4*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .0001$, N/A: Not Applicable

Figure 1: Mean values for the perceived offensiveness of the 30 words for the English L1 and LX users (extracted from Author 2016: 120)

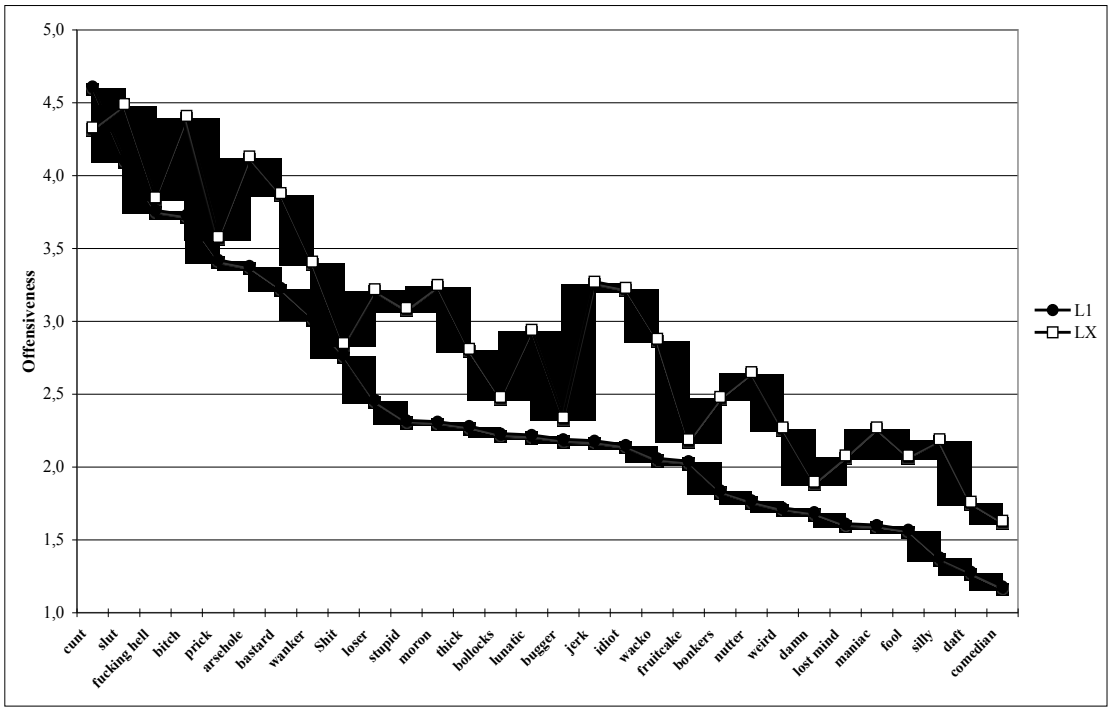


Figure 2: Mean values of L1 and LX users for the understanding of “cunt”, its offensiveness and its self-reported frequency of use

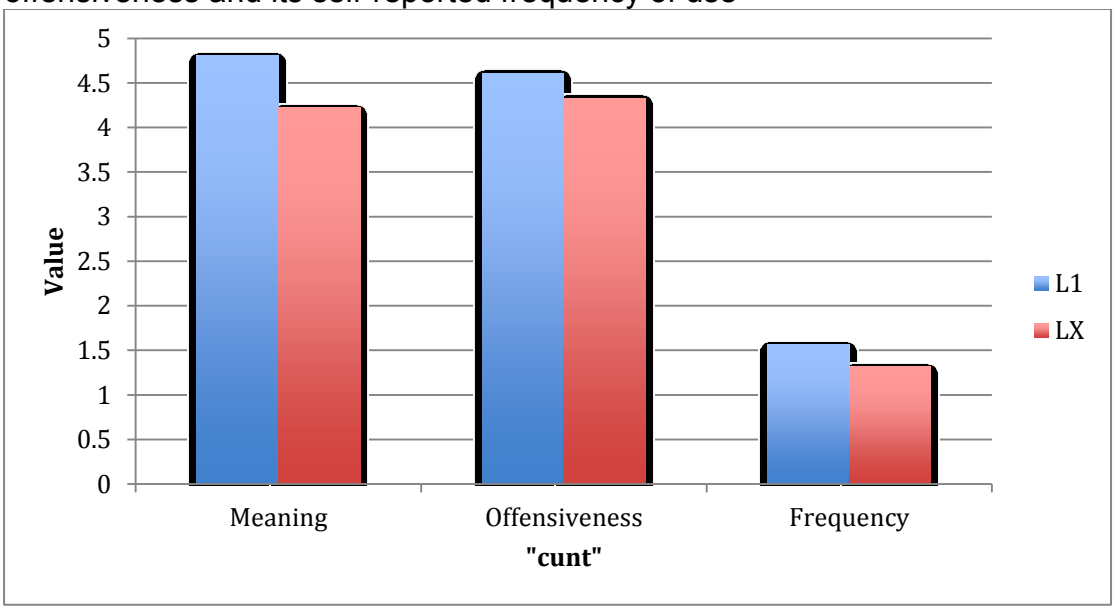


Figure 3: The effects of personality traits on the understanding, the offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use

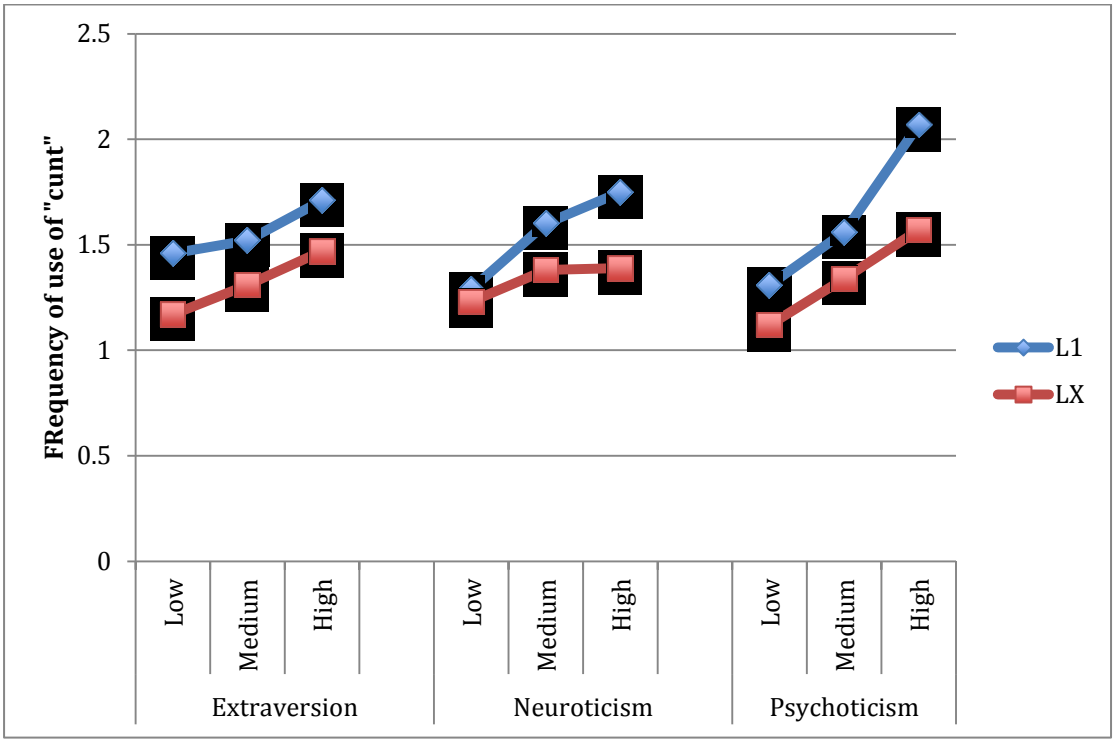


Figure 4: The effect of education level on the self-reported frequency of use of the word

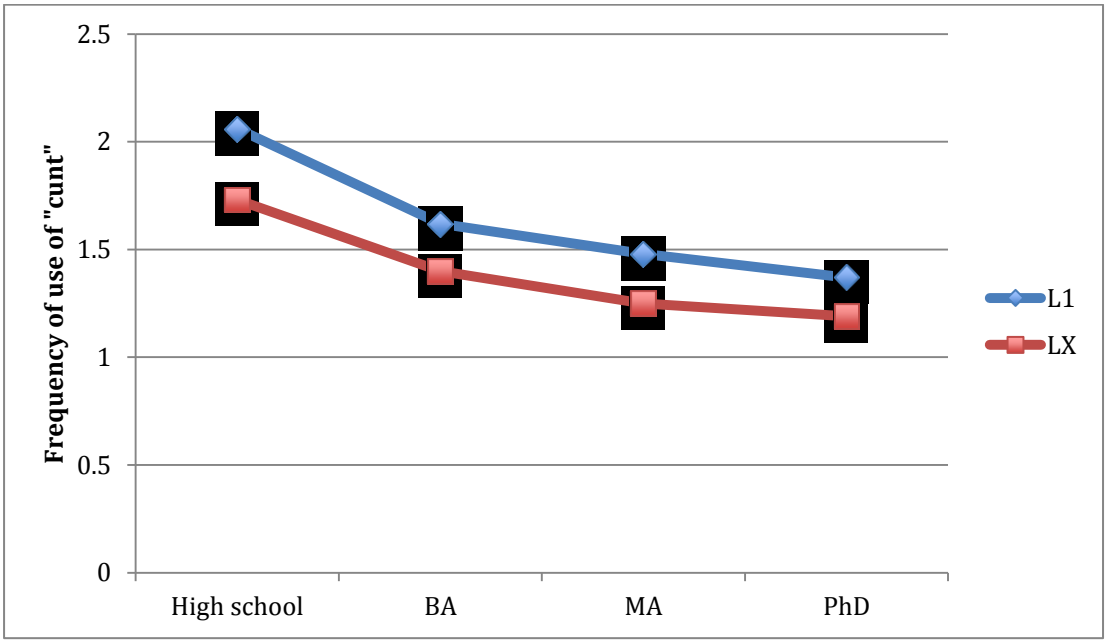


Figure 5: The effect of age on the self-reported frequency of use of the word

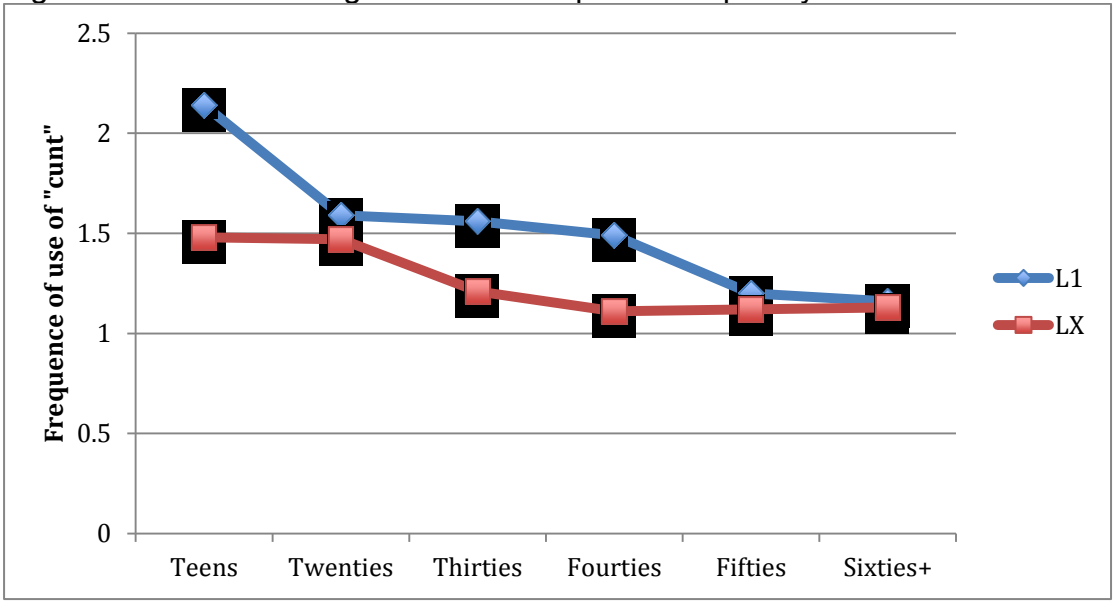


Figure 6: The effect of gender on the self-reported frequency of use of the word

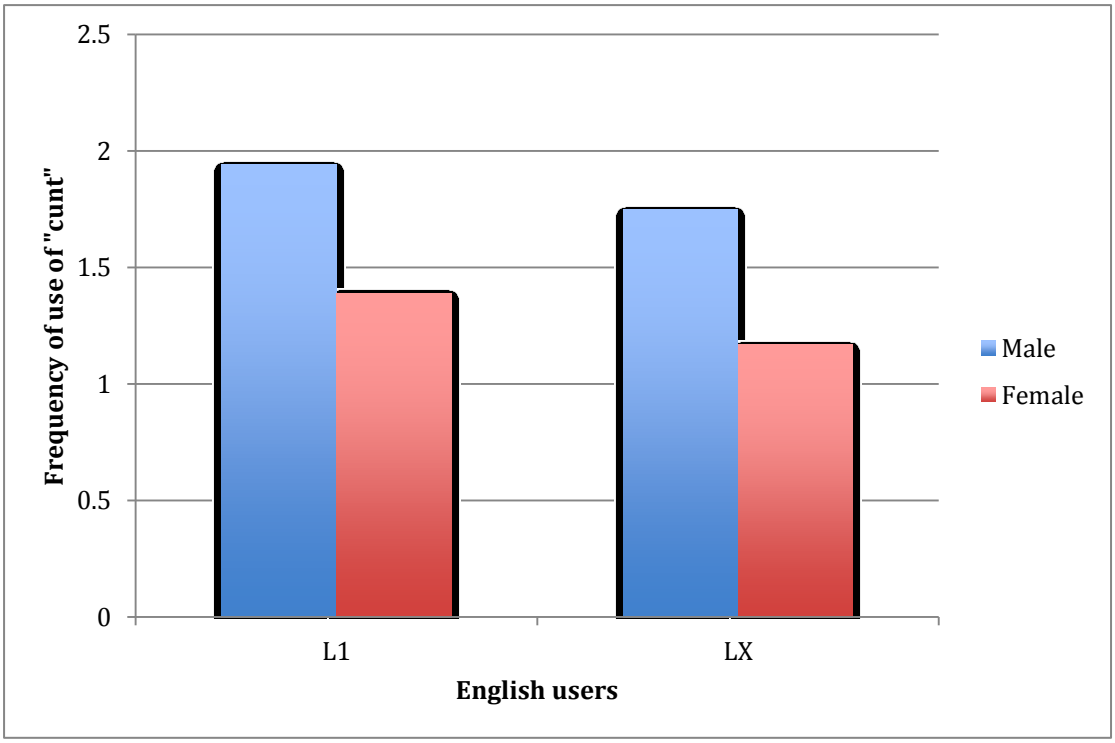


Figure 7: The effect of frequency of swearing in the workplace on the offensiveness and the frequency of use of the word

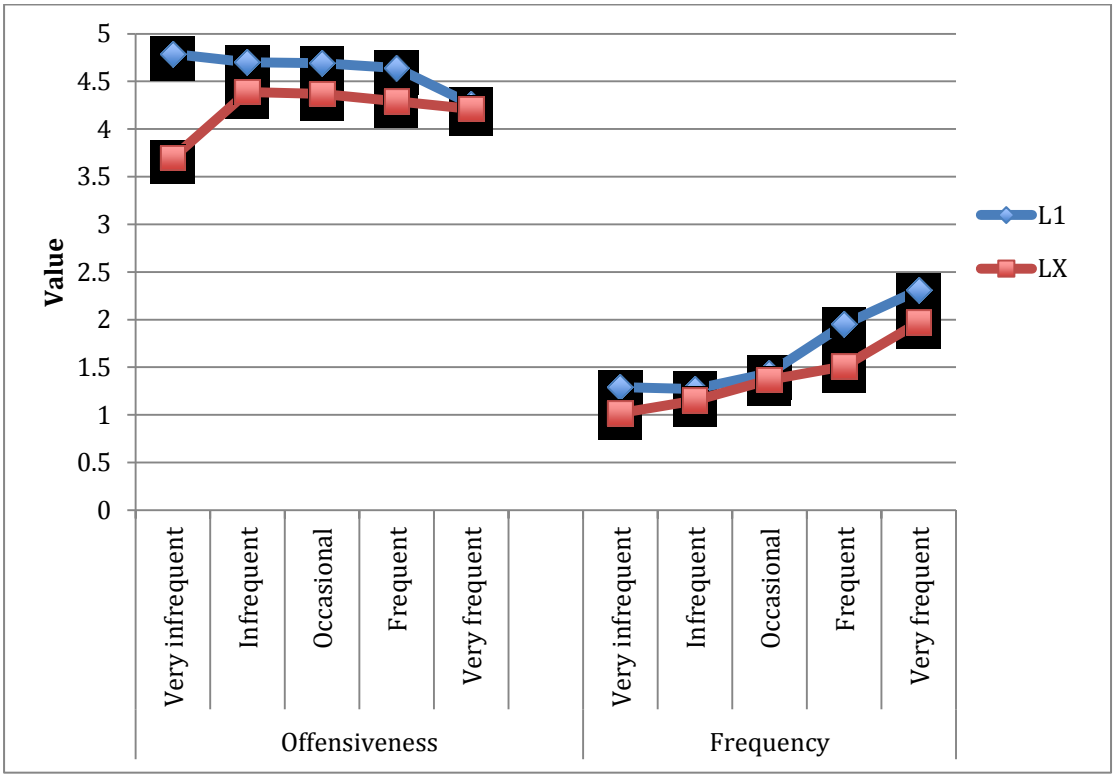


Figure 8: The effect of self-reported oral proficiency in LX English on the understanding, the offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use of the word

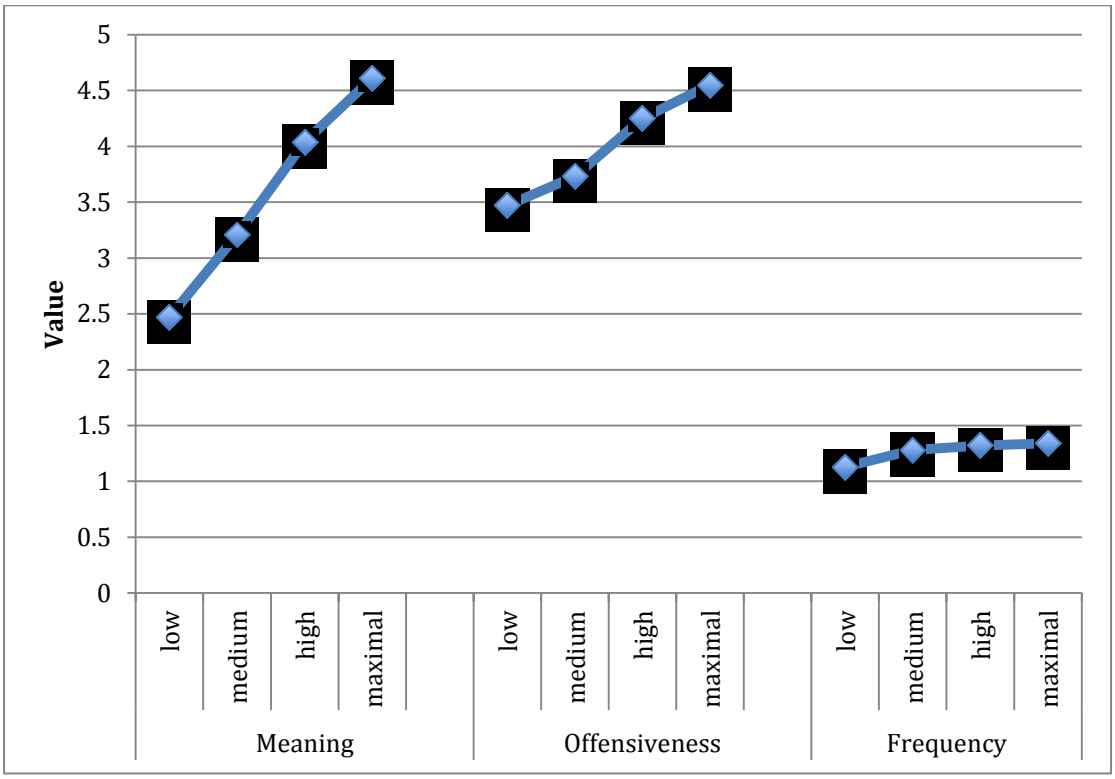


Figure 9: The effect of frequency of use of LX English on the understanding, the offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use of the word

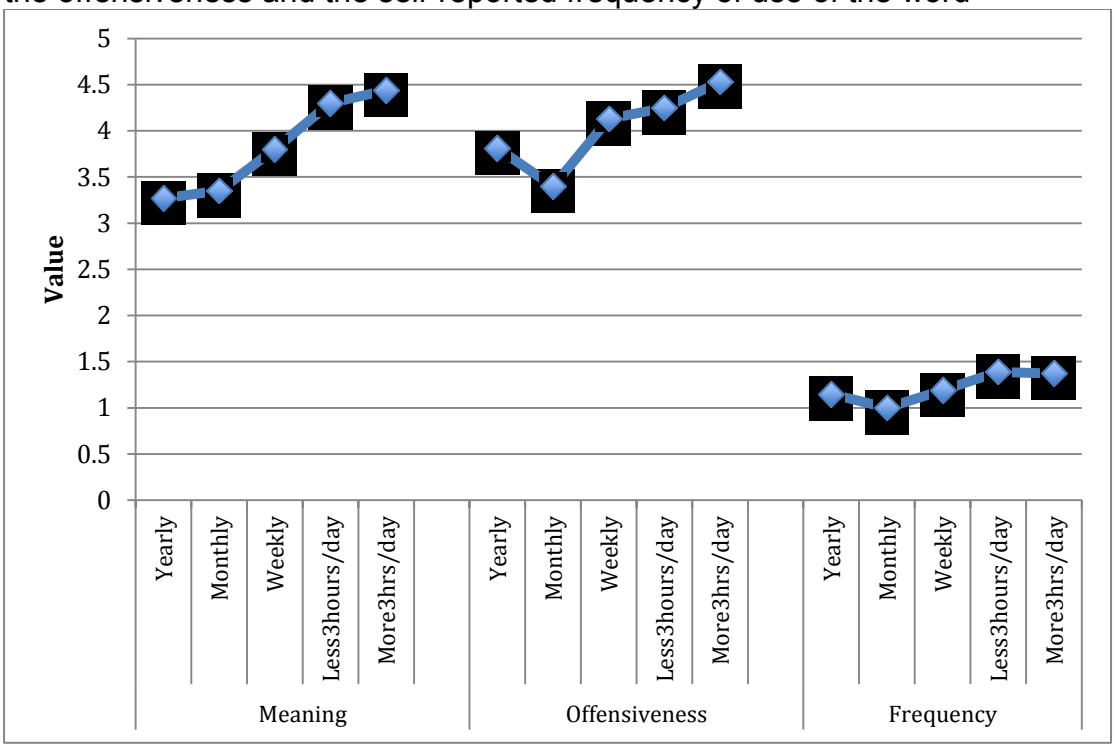


Figure 10: The effect of context of acquisition of LX English on the understanding, the offensiveness and the self-reported frequency of use of the word

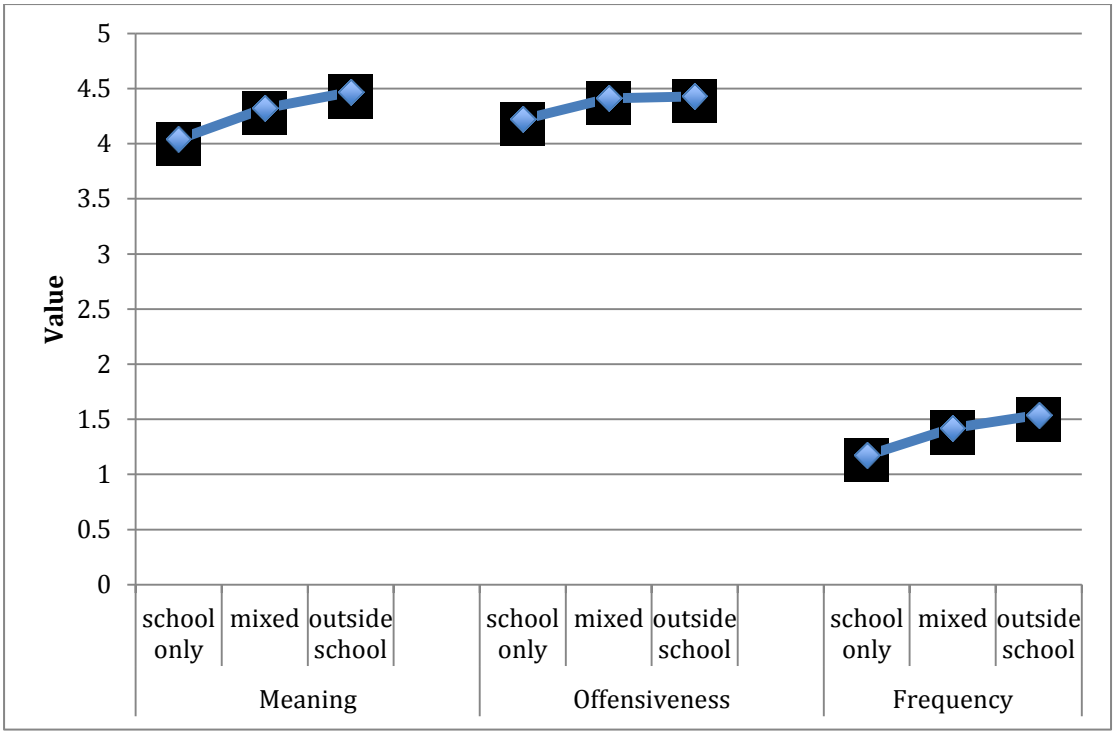
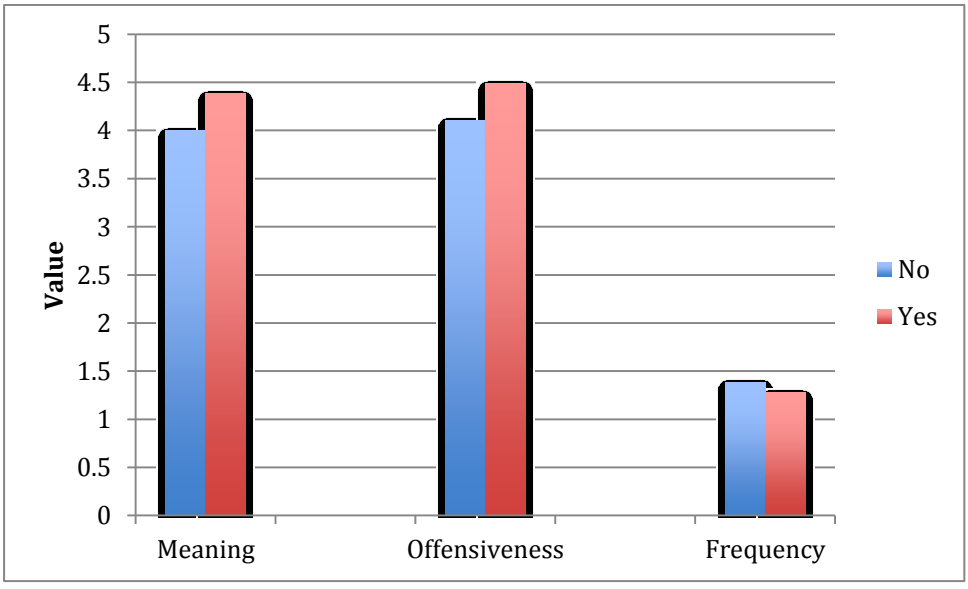


Figure 11: The effect of LX users having lived in an English-speaking environment on understanding, offensiveness and self-reported frequency of use of the word



[1] As some participants did not provide an answer to all questions, totals may vary for individual variables.